

May I Have Your Divided Attention: On the Emancipatory Potential of Educational Heterotopia and Heterochrony

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INTRODUCTION

When, in March 1967, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopia “to an audience of Parisian architects,” he made only passing reference to educational spaces.¹ In his lecture Foucault mentions nineteenth-century boarding schools as an example of “crisis heterotopias”: “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.”² The adolescent boys in the boarding schools Foucault refers to are in a state of crisis because of their sexual awakening: “the first manifestations of sexual virility were ... supposed to take place ‘elsewhere’ than at home.”³

Foucault defines the heterotopia most generally as a space “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” He adds that “heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time — which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies.”⁴ Following his definition of heterotopia, we might define heterochrony as a time capable of juxtaposing in a single real time several times, several temporalities that are in themselves incompatible. Two oft-cited examples are the theater and the cemetery. The theater joins and juxtaposes in one place and time the fictitious and enacted space and time in which the play on the stage is set — say the Russian countryside in the early 1900s — and the actual time and place of the theater and spectators — say, the Olivier Theatre in London where Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* was being performed in May 2011. The cemetery joins in one place and time the world of the dead, characterized by physical immobility and a lack of phenomenological time, and the world of the living, characterized by physical mobility and the awareness of passing time.

Foucault acknowledges that in modern societies most heterotopias do not take the form of crisis heterotopias but rather of “heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.”⁵ While Foucault does not give examples of educational spaces in this category, other scholars have taken up the heterotopia of deviation as analytic framework for exceptional educational spaces. For example, Geoff Danaher, Beverley Moriarty, and Patrick Danaher discuss the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children as a heterotopia. This school, launched in 2000, “accompanies the [travelling agricultural] show on its annual pilgrimage through eastern Australia and into the Northern Territory, providing primary school education for eligible members of the show community.”⁶ The travelling school functions as heterotopia because it joins in one place the incongruent spaces of the school and the carnival. The Netherlands has had a travelling school for show children since 1955, and recent media reports

suggest that the school still functions as heterotopia, bringing the disparate worlds of mainstream, place-bound civilians and itinerant carnival entrepreneurs together in one mobile space.⁷

In this essay I want to discuss heterotopia and heterochrony as much less exceptional educational phenomena, but as holding important emancipatory potential. For this, I turn to Jacques Rancière's uptake of the concepts of heterotopia and heterochrony. I will use this discussion to augment a vision for education proposed by Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström in their "Manifesto for Education."⁸ Specifically, I will argue that schools have always been heterotopic and heterochronic spaces and that attempts to reduce schools' heterotopic and heterochronic nature are attempts to curtail or reduce the emancipatory possibilities of school spaces.

WORKERS IN HETEROTOPIAS AND HETEROCHRONIES

Throughout his work Jacques Rancière has shown how the assumption that the consciousness of those who *think* is clearly distinct from the consciousness of those who *do*, is deeply flawed. As he writes in *The Nights of Labor*: "My little story of odd proletarian nights would like to question precisely this jealous concern to preserve popular, plebeian, or proletarian purity."⁹ Because there is no such proletarian purity of consciousness, and because workers throughout history have demonstrated their intellectual interest and capacity, attempts to keep doing and thinking separate have failed.

Owners of the means of production — or, in more common parlance, "bosses" — have sought to keep workers mentally focused on their menial tasks, while workers have understood that the boss can monitor their physical output but not their mental activity. As Claude-Anthime Corbon, editor of the French socialist journal *L'Atelier*, put it in 1859: "It seems that this is the problem posed: to spend the least possible amount of intelligent force for the best possible wage."¹⁰ Workers sought to spend the least amount of intelligent force on the tasks assigned by the boss not because they were lazy but because they reserved such intelligent force for their own interests, which included reading, writing, and aesthetic contemplation. "The man who planes his boards does not sell his thoughts to a master."¹¹

The bosses could not control workers' minds, but they regulated a spatial and temporal separation between at least the outward manifestations of the doing of work and the thinking of leisure: the temporal separation between "the boss's time" after one punches in and "one's own time" after one punches out, and the spatial separation between, for instance, the factory and the book club. Even this separation, however, failed, as workers knew to make good use of the pauses and wait times in the work process itself:

Nineteenth-century artisans constructed their forms of subjectivation in relation to a broken temporality determined by the accelerations and stoppages of work. Instead of being subjected through them to the will of their masters, they could take advantage of them to incorporate in their time of workers what had always been the contrary of work, namely, leisure.¹²

Similarly, Jonathan Rose has documented how workers in Britain have historically resisted the imposition of a clear separation between work and leisure — in particular the leisure of their own intellectual development. For example, in eighteenth-century

Scotland, “weavers were legendary for their habit of reading at the loom.”¹³ Rose quotes weaver Joseph Livesey (b. 1794) who wrote: “The book was laid on the breast-beam, with a cord slipped on to keep the leaves from rising. Head, hands, and feet, all busy at the same time!”¹⁴ Rose also recounts how Welshman Thomas Jones (b. 1870) read a wide range of literature including Plutarch, Shakespeare, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, “often on his employer’s time. (He hid them under the ledger at the Rhymney Iron Works, where he worked a thirteen-hour day as a time-keeper for 9s. a week).”¹⁵ And in Birmingham, factory worker “V.W. Garratt (b. 1892) surrounded his workbench with a barricade of boxes, set up a small mirror to provide early warning of the foreman’s approach, and studied the Everyman’s Library *Sartor Resartus* when he was being paid to solder gas-meter fittings.”¹⁶

Rancière’s and Rose’s historical studies take on new significance in a contemporary economy in which work can be more intermittent, and technology has facilitated the further blending of work and leisure time. Without endorsing the neoliberal encouragement of “flexibility” as a euphemism for workers’ tolerance of the precarity of income, Rancière argues,

the contemporary forms of work put again on the foreground the issue of the intervals of work and of their transformation into intervals of subjectivation: constant shifts from employment to unemployment, development of part-time work and all forms of intermittence; multiplication of people taking part both in the time of salaried work and in the time of education, or in the time of cultural creation.... Rather than trying to find a unique figure of the worker, such as the ‘cognitive’ worker, we should investigate the multiplicity of the lines of subjectivation and the forms of rupture produced by the reappropriation of all those intervals that make the seemingly outdated temporality of emancipation come again on the agenda.¹⁷

The reason that Rancière frames the frequent shifts from paid work to education to volunteer work or cultural creation as encompassing a “temporality of emancipation” is that these shifts make the separation between a person’s various roles and places in society more tenuous. How, for example, to separate one’s role as an unpaid but accomplished photographer (or blogger, or slash fiction writer, or Storify curator, and so on) from one’s paid but unfulfilling role as an administrative assistant when one can use the same computer to work on both activities, and can switch between them multiple times within a workday and without leaving one’s desk? The office and the workday have become heterotopic and heterochronic, and this is not without risks as, for instance, work email encroaches on home time, the kitchen table becomes a spatial extension of the office, and it can be a struggle to protect private time and space unencumbered by work expectations.¹⁸ However, Rancière calls attention to the emancipatory potential of heterotopia and heterochrony because it is more difficult in such a time and place to separate the intellectual equality enacted in one role from the intellectual subservience expected in the other role. “This is what emancipation means: the practice of dissensus, constructing another time in the time of domination, the time of equality within the time of inequality.”¹⁹

Rancière’s conception of intellectual equality (or equality of intelligence) merits a brief explanation because it is counterintuitive, especially for those who work in formal and institutional educational contexts premised on the sorting and ranking of students. As Todd May explains so clearly, Rancière’s idea of “equal intelligence

... does not require that we hold people to be equally capable of doing high-level theoretical physics or solving difficult mathematical problems.” It is a more basic conception of intelligence as the equally shared basis for respect, the idea that “we are, unless we are deeply damaged in some way, capable of creating meaningful lives with one another, talking with one another, understanding one another, and reasoning about ourselves and our situations.”²⁰ In other words: the vast majority of us — young people included — are perfectly capable of shaping and making sense of our lives without relying on some expert explanation of how our lives work.

For students, then, similar possibilities exist for the emancipatory experience of the time and place of equality within the time and place of inequality. These possibilities shed new light on, and augment, Biesta and Säfström’s arguments for the emancipatory role of education. By discussing education as “atemporal” and neglecting its spatial dimensions, Biesta and Säfström have made their argument quite abstract; seeing the heterotopic and heterochronic nature of schools will allow us to see concrete possibilities for emancipatory education or, perhaps more accurately, emancipatory interruptions of schooling.

THE TENSION BETWEEN WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT — *FOR YOU, HERE AND NOW*

In “A Manifesto for Education,” Biesta and Säfström propose that education, in the sense of *education* and not of, for instance, job skills training or socialization, must have “an interest in the freedom of the child.”²¹ By this “freedom” they are referring not to consumer choice or to negative liberty from any kind of rule or authority, but to the fundamental intellectual freedom of each and every person. They note that

such freedom is often projected into the future, either through a psychological argument that focuses on development of inner faculties or potential, or through a sociological argument that focuses on social change, liberation from oppression and the overcoming of inequality.²²

They propose that “the proper place of education” is to be found in the atemporal tension between “what is” and “what is not,” rather than in the temporal tension between “what is” and “what is not *yet*.”²³ Their purpose in setting up this tension is not to suggest a compromise, a “golden mean between two extremes,” but to highlight the disruptive function of “what is not” into “what is.” While I agree with Biesta and Säfström that education ought to have an interest in the freedom of the student, and that this freedom ought not to be projected into a developmental future, I believe the tension between “what is” and “what is not” can be cast more sharply, bringing back its temporal nature and introducing its spatial features, while steering clear of the eternal promise of a better future. While Biesta and Säfström give the freedom of the child an Arendtian inflection, emphasizing the subjectivity of the child as “radically new” and “uniquely new,” I want to highlight the child’s assertion of her or his equality as the central moment when “what is not” interrupts “what is.”

The first way to recast the tension between “what is” and “what is not” is to say it is a tension between “what is” and “what is not” — *for you*. The point is not that what is not for you today may be for you tomorrow — in that I agree with Biesta and Säfström; the point is that what is not for you today *is* today — for other people. In other words, “what is” and “what is not” exist in the same time but in different spaces: what is not in the South Bronx may be what is on the Upper East Side or,

put more generally, what is not on this side of the tracks may be what is on the other side of the tracks. This is the division and tension between what is and what is not *here* — in *this* school, in *this* neighborhood, in *this* social class.

The second way to recast the tension between “what is” and “what is not” is to say it is a tension between “what is” and “what is not” — *here and now*. Biesta, in his personal commentary on the joint-authored Manifesto writes: “If we take freedom seriously — as something that can happen right here and right now — then perhaps the educational moment, the educational event arises out of the confrontation between what is and what is not; right here and right now.”²⁴ However, Biesta does not further elaborate on this point, and the semi-colon suggests that “here and now” pertains to “confrontation” rather than to “what is and what is not.” I want to highlight that there is often a tension between what is and what is not within the walls of school and during the school day. Within the spatial and temporal boundaries of the school the young person is first and foremost a *student* — and, as Biesta argues, increasingly a *learner*, which is to say that he or she is “constructed in terms of a lack,” as “the one who is missing something.”²⁵ Within these boundaries, young people are often not the writers, thinkers, designers and so on they may be elsewhere and at other times, and in which they can demonstrate their intellectual equality.

It may seem like students are in the opposite position from the workers Rancière and Rose write about: students are engaged in mental activity, and may seek to occupy their hands with doodling or folding paper airplanes, whereas the workers have their hands occupied by assigned tasks but seek to occupy their minds. However, the crucial difference is not one of hands versus minds, but of *equality versus inequality*: while schools occupy students’ minds, they may do so with tasks that do not address the students as beings with equal intelligence, in the Rancièrian sense. Students are often caught in an “explicative order” of schooling that treats them as unequal beings, and they may try to resist and compensate for that order by asserting themselves as equals, similar to how the manual laborers that Rancière and Rose document have done so.²⁶

Schools are organized around the assumption that young people need things explained to them in order to learn them, but Rancière argues, “to explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself.”²⁷ Moreover, (mainstream) schools are organized around the assumption that things should be explained in a certain sequence and at a certain time, best determined by adults

The master always keeps a piece of learning — that is to say, a piece of the student’s ignorance — up his sleeve. I understood that, says the satisfied student. You think so, corrects the master. In fact, there’s a difficulty here that I’ve been sparing you until now. We will explain it when we get to the corresponding lesson.²⁸

This explicative order is an order that keeps students in their allotted places (for example, grade levels) and treats them as intellectual unequals. However, students resist this order, for example by letting their minds be elsewhere, that is, in a place and time different from the classroom and period in which they find themselves. While there is plenty of psychological literature that addresses the problem of student distraction, with the purpose of combating it and keeping students in the here and

now, I want to suggest that what appears to be sheer distraction may be the creation of heterotopia and heterochrony, and an enactment of equality.

A number of years ago I had the chance to observe a grade six class. The teacher was using a Trivial Pursuit game to teach — or at least occupy — some of the children in a fun way. But what I remember more clearly was a girl sitting quietly to the side, disengaged from what her classmates were doing, reading the novel *Charlotte's Web* under her desk. I asked her quietly how she liked the class, and she shrugged and mumbled something about being new to the school. In my reading, she refused to let her mind be occupied with the teacher's trivia. In an art museum I watched a boy of perhaps eight or ten years old who did not move along to the next painting in the docent's guided tour, but lingered and lagged behind. I saw him as indicating that he was not done looking at that one painting, thank you, and that he chose to be out of sync with the place and time of the tour and to continue to study the painting on his own terms.

Of course there are times when students must be asked to suspend all other activities and interests to be able to focus singular attention on what is being taught, because undivided attention is necessary to master a particular skill (the Bunsen burner in the chemistry lab comes to mind) or grasp the importance of a difficult concept. Moreover, Rancière stresses that telling students to pay attention to a task *that requires their intelligence* contributes to their emancipation. As he has his imaginary schoolmaster say to a student: "Don't say that you can't. You know how to see, how to speak, you know what to show, you can remember. What more is needed? An absolute attention for seeing and seeing again, saying and repeating."²⁹

However, undivided attention is not needed during all the hours young people are expected to spend inside school buildings, nor is it realistic or emancipatory to expect such undivided attention. Schools fulfill several tasks, including a custodial one that allows students' parents to go to work, and a socializing one that seeks to habituate students to being on time and being civil to people one has not personally chosen to spend time with. Some — and possibly quite a bit — of the time students spend in schools does not engage them as thinkers, interpreters, and sense-makers and, like the workers in nineteenth-century France and Britain, students may use that time to engage in intellectual activities of their own choosing.

Rancière has been quite clear that schooling as state institution is not designed to be an emancipatory enterprise. However, just as emancipation was enacted by workers in the non-emancipatory space and time of the factory or the shift, emancipation can be enacted in the non-emancipatory space and time of schooling. The challenge may be to learn to see these enactments not as unproductive moments to be arrested and prohibited but as moments where those who have been cast as learners manifest themselves as speakers.³⁰ The one who is positioned as learner can, in the same here and now, position herself as poet by writing poetry during a boring biology lesson, or as political organizer by sending text messages to friends about an upcoming protest. The evidence of people's ability and intelligence lies in their disidentification from the roles and positions they have been assigned, and one way to disidentify and emancipate oneself is to enact "what is" and "what is not"

in the same space and time, in other words, to create and dwell in heterotopias and heterochronies. Classrooms and school days, or other educational spaces and times, are heterotopias and heterochronies and those who reside in these spaces and times can juxtapose in them emancipatory and stultifying roles and activities that are not supposed to go together in the same space and time.

As Colin Symes documents in his critical study of the narrative architecture of Australian school diaries, schools increasingly seek to bring the subjectivity of young people, both inside and outside of school space and time, in line with student or learner subjectivity.³¹ This is especially significant because extending school space and time means extending a space and time in which the young person is positioned as unequal. The diaries advise against the use of time away from school for non-school oriented activities; breaks and weekends should serve the purpose of renewing energy for study, just as breaks and weekends for workers were supposed to serve the purpose of “re-creation,” that is, the replenishing of energy to be dedicated to work activities.

Given that the majority of the time at school is prescribed and students have very little discretion over its exercise, it is not surprising then that much of the temporal advice relates to making the time outside school count. This amounts to bringing the study regimen of school home, which has spatial implications: students will need to create an appropriately equipped, lit and ventilated “study zone” and “where all you will do is homework and study.... This means **no** eating, **no** drinking, **no** game playing, **no** daydreaming, **no** music.”³²

Of course there are good reasons for prohibiting certain kinds of multitasking — such as texting and driving, or eating while conducting chemical experiments. However, there are many other places where multiple activities can take place safely and without causing disruption to others. The deliberate breaking of time and space rules, of what activity should be relegated to what time slot and what space, can, then, be a form of resistance, a way of asserting that, while one cannot escape temporal and spatial regulation altogether, one sets limits to the total control it seeks to have over the ordering and pace of one’s activities. As Foucault put it, it is a way of practicing “the art of not being governed quite so much.”³³ Reading a novel during a mind-numbing class, updating one’s blog during designated study time, listening to audio-books while stuffing envelopes in the office — they can all be used to assert intellectual equality in places and during times that seek to keep students and workers in their allotted place and time.

CONCLUSION

Emancipatory possibilities are not emancipatory guarantees. Heterotopias and heterochronies are not inherently emancipatory, so classrooms or schools are not emancipatory by virtue of being heterotopic or heterochronic. Students may not be writing poetry or organizing a protest; they may be looking up last night’s hockey scores or scalping concert tickets, and these last two activities are less about making one’s voice heard and more about the economic roles of consumer and entrepreneur. However, I want to call attention to the *possibility* that students who divide their attention demonstrate not a lack of motivation or a refusal to be educated, but a decision to educate themselves in the midst of a system that promotes the efficiency of the school day to optimize the achievement of predetermined learning outcomes.

My argument is not that we should seek to make schools heterotopic and heterochronic spaces, but rather that schools have always been such spaces because there have always been students who have resisted the singular time and place of schooling. Following Rancière's thought, the "emancipatory school" is a contradiction in terms because schooling is structured by the inequality of grades, ranks, and "this is not yet for you." Nonetheless, some schools are more open to emancipatory interruptions than others or, adapting a phrase I have used previously, leave "a space where [equality] may enter."³⁴ Insofar as they seek to leave such a space, they should not restrict the heterotopias and heterochronies in which students join and juxtapose the time and place of inequality with the time and place of equality. Students may deliberately keep their attention divided between the order that assigns them a place and time of instruction, and the place and time in which they demonstrate they are poets, hackers, cartoonists, bloggers, filmmakers, and other equal, speaking beings.

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2. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 25; 26.

5. *Ibid.*, 25.

6. Geoff Danaher, Beverley Moriarty, and Patrick A. Danaher, "Challenging Heterotopic Space: A Study of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children," *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* 3, no. 1 (2006): 44.

7. Sophie Derkzen, "De Rijdende Kermisschool: Kind van de Cakewalk" [The Mobile Carnival School: Child of the Cakewalk], *Vrij Nederland* 72 (July 2011), <http://www.vn.nl/Standaard-Media-Pagina/De-rijdende-kermissschool-Kind-van-de-cakewalk.htm>.

8. Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström, "A Manifesto for Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 5 (2011): 540–47.

9. Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989 [1981]), x.

10. *Ibid.*, 56.

11. *Ibid.*, 76.

12. Jacques Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?," in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2012), 27.

13. Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 16–7.

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

15. *Ibid.*, 34.

16. *Ibid.*, 42.

17. Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?," 28–9.

18. See, for example, Ben Agger, *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism: Cultures, Jobs, Families, Schools, Bodies* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2004).

19. Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?," 28.

20. Todd May, *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 7.

21. Biesta and Säfström, "A Manifesto for Education," 540.

22. Ibid., 541.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 543.
25. Gert Biesta, "Learner, Student, Speaker: Why It Matters How We Call Those We Teach," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 5–6 (2010): 541.
26. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991 [1987]), 4.
27. Ibid., 6.
28. Ibid., 21.
29. Ibid., 23.
30. Biesta, "Learner, Student, Speaker."
31. Colin Symes, "No Time on Their Hands: Children and the Narrative Architecture of School Diaries," *Time & Society* 21 no. 2 (2012): 156–174.
32. Ibid., 166, emphasis in original.
33. Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 45.
34. Claudia Ruitenberg, "What If Democracy Really Matters?" *Journal of Educational Controversy* 3, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v003n001/a005.shtml>.